

more of an investment by way of quality, but these are significant changes and we should all support them.

In terms of the increase in incentives that I would hope we can do at a future date, I described them in this way: incentives for States to invest in quality ratings and improvement systems. We know a lot of acronyms. This is QRIS, Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, which encourages childcare providers to make continuous improvements in the care they provide and the facilities they use often through financial incentives, such as higher reimbursement rates, when a certain quality level is reached.

However, I still believe the bill we have in front of us represents a substantial and significant improvement over the current law. We owe our most vulnerable children nothing less.

For the first time we are requiring all States to develop a robust health and safety set of standards and to institute a consistent background check for childcare providers. We are requiring States to formally coordinate their early learning programs to improve service coordination and delivery. We are allowing children who qualify for a subsidy to receive 1 year of care before their eligibility is redetermined. This will help promote stability and continuity for the entire family and encourage the child to develop strong relationships with his or her teachers and peers in childcare.

Finally, we are increasing the investment in quality from the 4-percent quality set-aside per year—currently required in law—to 10-percent within 5 years, including a separate set-aside for infants and toddlers. Quality is a continuum and continual investment. It is not a one-time purchase. It is something we need to support and sustain.

This bill is about investing in our children's future and supporting working parents. I urge all of my colleagues to join us in supporting the CCBDBG reauthorization—a nice acronym for a long bill.

I mentioned earlier that if children get quality early care and learning, they will learn more now and earn more later when they are in the workforce. There is no question about that. All the studies indicate that. We know that. There is no disagreement about that.

We also have to recognize that there are so many families—somewhere in the millions—that have two parents working, and we know the stress and challenge that creates. In addition, we have just come through the worst economic downturn since the 1930s. Climbing out of that hole and having all of the economic pressures on these families, they are often also heavily burdened or even crushed by the cost of childcare.

We have an opportunity with this legislation to move forward and make needed changes on issues, such as health and safety standards and mak-

ing sure we are setting aside more dollars for infants and toddlers.

There are a whole range of actions we are taking, but we still have a ways to go to speak directly to the needs that working families have in terms of the cost of childcare and ensuring the kind of quality they have a right to expect.

Finally, on a related topic, we need to make sure we are making a national and substantial commitment to early learning. The President has talked about this issue. People from both parties and CEOs tell us about it all the time. We need to get together on these other issues even as we pass this bipartisan legislation.

I wish to commend the work of Senator HARKIN and Ranking Member ALEXANDER, who are working to get this done, and the good work over several years now done by Senator MIKULSKI and Senator BURR.

We need to get this done and then get to work on some of the childcare and early learning challenges our country faces and families are often burdened with.

I yield the floor and note the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. CASEY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

NEVADA SESQUICENTENNIAL

Mr. REID. Mr. President, throughout this year, my home State will celebrate the 150th anniversary of its path to Statehood, on October 31, 1864.

Next week, while I will be home visiting my family and constituents, the Battle Born State will celebrate the day that Congress passed and President Abraham Lincoln signed legislation paving the way for Nevada to become the 36th State. At that time Congress was in a rush to welcome Nevada into the Union. It was during the Civil War; it was raging.

The only other State admitted to the Union during the war was West Virginia, which seceded from Virginia to remain part of the Union in 1863.

Congress didn't want to wait until the next session to admit another new State—a new State that could swing the Presidential election in Lincoln's favor and provide crucial votes for the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery. Nevadans had already rejected one proposed State constitution, so there was no time to waste.

On March 21, 1864, in the waning hours of the 38th Congress, a law was passed allowing Nevada to enter the Union whenever voters finally passed and President Lincoln approved a State constitution.

It wasn't during the normal course of business, but this wasn't the normal course with the Civil War going on. Typically Congress would get the final word on admission of a new State to the Union.

But these, as I have indicated, were certainly not normal times. Even today we acknowledge Nevada's unique path to Statehood on our State flag with the words: "Battle Born."

Throughout this year, we will celebrate Nevada's 150th birthday with events in every corner of the State. From my hometown of Searchlight to Virginia City to Elko, there is a 150th anniversary event to match every interest.

Nevada is a very large State. Area wide it is the seventh largest in the country. It is a unique State with more mountains than any place other than Alaska. We have 314 separate mountain ranges. We have one mountain that is 14,000 feet high. We have 32 mountains over 11,000 feet high. We have wide-ranging land, and we have some of the coldest places in the Nation and some of the hottest places in the Nation.

We have all kinds of wildlife. Theodore Roosevelt created an antelope range that is large and sparsely populated. We have not only the antelope, we also have desert bighorn sheep. In Nevada we have mountain goats; we have almost 3 million acres of wilderness. It is a very beautiful State. It is more than the bright lights of Las Vegas, Reno, and Lake Tahoe—even though we are very proud of sharing the stewardship of Lake Tahoe with the State of California—as Mark Twain said: "the fairest picture the whole earth affords."

We will mark Nevada's second constitutional convention, the day Nevada voters finally approved its constitution and the day, Halloween, October 31, 1864, that Lincoln proclaimed Nevada's Statehood. The 150th anniversary of our admission to the Union provides a wonderful opportunity to study Nevada's history. It is also the birthday of my young brother, so it is easy to remember—admission day, Halloween, and my brother's birthday all occurred the same day.

It is also a chance to reflect on Nevada's unique pioneer spirit—a spirit that continues to make our State very special.

Mr. HELLER. Madam President, I rise to recognize the great State of Nevada, as we celebrate 150 years of statehood. It is a remarkable opportunity to speak on the floor of this Chamber about this milestone, given the role the Congress played in the formation of the Silver State. The movement to make the Nevada Territory a State began within the territory, but the first attempt to formulate a Constitution failed.

Shortly after, the 38th Congress passed an enabling act for Nevada statehood. Signed by President Abraham Lincoln on March 21, 1864, this bill

made it possible for Nevada to eventually adopt a State constitution. Lincoln proclaimed Nevada a State on October 31, 1864.

The guarantee of statehood was given to us by Abraham Lincoln, who, without assistance, would go on to pass the 13th amendment, win the Civil War, and heal our broken Nation.

Marking the 150th year of Nevada's statehood takes me back to Carson City when I was just 4 years old. It was Nevada's centennial celebration, the date was October 31, 1964. I remember being with my family, sitting on the lawn, listening to the Carson City Municipal Band lead the festivities at the State capitol.

During that same year, 1964, Lyndon Johnson was reelected over Barry Goldwater and would go on to declare a war on poverty. In 1964, race riots broke out in Harlem. Across the Nation, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law. The 24th amendment to abolish the use of poll taxes was ratified. In 1964, the Summer Olympics were held in Tokyo, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which ultimately allowed for increased military action in Vietnam. The James Bond film "Goldfinger" began its run in the United States and "Bewitched" premiered on television.

So much has changed in these past 50 years, but the character of Nevada has not. From its first birthday to its 100th, to its 150th, Nevada continues to be shaped by its people, people who are entrepreneurial, fiercely independent, and as diverse as our terrain. We are molded by the grit, hard work, and pioneering spirit of individuals determined to succeed.

The list of men and women who have molded our State is long. Where some saw impossibility, a Nevada Senator by the name of Newlands saw opportunity. To this day, his legacy lives on in the hay, the cattle, and the very fields that were made possible by the waters he brought to this desert.

Standing among our Nation's great, frozen in bronze, greeting visitors to the Nation's Capitol is another Nevadan, Sarah Winnemucca. She, similar to many Nevadans, challenged the status quo. She refused to accept the injustices brought on her Native American brothers and sisters.

Instead of fighting with a weapon, she fought with her pen. Through her words, the plight of our fellow Americans living on reservations was heard.

Of course, in Nevada, Mark Twain was born. Samuel Clemens adopted the famous pen name while covering the news for the *Enterprise* in Virginia City. Twain wrote eloquently about Nevada, from the rough-and-tumble attitude of the Wild West to the beauty of Lake Tahoe, dubbing it "surely the fairest picture that the whole earth affords." Any visitor to this pristine landscape would also agree.

More recently, I think of Paul Laxalt, the former Lieutenant Governor, Governor, and U.S. Senator from Ne-

vada. Among other things, he was instrumental in preserving Lake Tahoe and establishing our State's first community colleges and our medical school; or former Representative Barbara Vucanovich, who will be recorded in the history books as the first woman to represent Nevada in the U.S. House of Representatives. This alone is a remarkable achievement, but the integrity and determination with which she fulfilled her duties makes her achievement even grander.

Former State Senator Bill Raggio also comes to mind. He was a true statesman and the longest serving member in the history of the Nevada State Senate. These individuals have left their mark, but it is the people of Nevada who have forged the Silver State.

During the formation of our State's constitution, Nevadans demanded that our State's mothers and sisters be heard. The women of Nevada were granted the voice of a vote before the 19th Amendment was ratified by our Nation. We helped pioneer the vote for all.

During World War II, when our brave soldiers fought for peace and prosperity, Nevadans who were not able to fight abroad brought forth minerals such as magnesium from the ground. Magnesium, harvested near the township of Henderson, was considered a miracle metal for the munitions and airport parts which would help lead to us victory.

The residents of Boulder City built the Hoover Dam, a government infrastructure project which holds back 26 million acre-feet of water. The dam was completed early and under budget. With an expected 2,000-year lifespan, the Hoover Dam supplies clean energy to the grid, water to thirsty cities across the Southwest, and protection to downstream communities.

Ever since we were borne into the battle to mend our broken Nation, Nevadans have been willing and able. Although our population is small, our caliber is high. From all walks of life, brave Nevadans have heard and responded to the call to arms. At Naval Air Station Fallon, we host the Navy's top gun school. The elite men and women of our Armed Forces who train here push the limit, compete, and set the tone for global air superiority.

Welcoming tourists from across the globe, farming, mining, engineering, ranching, and serving in the Armed Forces, these are just a few things we Nevadans do. And as our State motto goes, all of these are done "all for our country."

Recent times have been tough in Nevada, but our pioneer spirit lives on. We continue to move forward. We have seen the booms and now, more than most, we continue to feel the most recent bust. Like many in our great Nation, Nevadans have lost homes, livelihoods, and the promise of a steady paycheck, but this will not deter us. Our State is battle born. We will continue

to fulfill our 150-year-old promise of being willing and able to give all for our country.

I am a proud Nevadan, and as the son of a auto mechanic from Carson City, it is a privilege to stand on this Senate floor to recognize our State's 150 years of Statehood.

Before I close, I thank Lieutenant Governor Brian Krolicki, chair of the Nevada Sesquicentennial Commission, for the hard work he has put into recognizing this important milestone. Over the course of this year, the commission has planned and overseen many events and activities, providing Nevadans an opportunity to reflect on where we have been and where we are going.

SYRIA

Mr. CASEY. Mr. President, I rise tonight to talk about Syria and the humanitarian crisis this conflict has created. This week we mark a very grim anniversary: the third anniversary of the beginning of the conflict in Syria. So we are entering our fourth year.

There is much to cover and talk about. I will be brief tonight, but it is important that we don't forget what is happening to the Syrian people and especially to the children in Syria.

Over the past 3 years the brutal Assad regime has unleashed a campaign of unspeakable violence against its own citizens, with 9.5 million people now needing humanitarian assistance in Syria. Syria's neighbors are overflowing with 2.5 million refugees. This week Amnesty International and Save The Children released reports that underscore the atrocities the Syrian people have suffered and continue to suffer. These reports describe the regime's use of starvation tactics against its own citizens: Syrian children dying from preventable diseases and newborns, newborn babies freezing to death in under-equipped hospitals. UNICEF reported this week that Syria is now one of the most dangerous places on Earth to be a child.

These unspeakable horrors confirm my worst fear about the conflict: that the most vulnerable and innocent are at the center of President Assad's siege against his own people.

I want to share the story of a 10-year-old Syrian boy when he recounted his experience with the conflict, this 10-year-old boy in his account from Save The Children's 2012 report entitled "Untold Atrocities, The Stories of Syria's Children." Here is one of the stories in his own words:

When the shells started to fall I ran. I ran so fast. I ran and I cried at the same time. When we were being bombed we had nothing. No food, no water, no toys, nothing. There was noway to buy food—the markets and shops were bombed out. After that we came back home. To make our food last we ate just once a day. My father went without food for days because there wasn't enough. I remember watching him tie his stomach with a rope so he would not feel hungry. One day men with guns broke into our house. They pulled out our food, threw it on the floor, stamped on it, so it would be too dirty to eat. Then we had nothing at all.

That is the recollection of a 10-year-old boy in Syria. And you go through the report, the catalog, really, of misery that was compiled by Save the Children from young boys and young girls of all different ages and every one of them has a tale of horror just as he outlined. Some are worse and more graphic than what I read.

This most recent report by Save the Children is entitled “A Devastating Toll,” and it describes the impact this conflict has had on children in great detail.

I commend the report to my colleagues.

In an article in the New York Times, in this case by Nicholas Kristof, he said, “Syria is today the world capital of human suffering.”

Anyone who knows the work done by Nicholas Kristof knows he has seen a lot of places in the world where there is terrible misery and suffering. So for him to say that is a substantial indication of how bad the conditions are in Syria. Of course, when he made that statement it was back in September, many months ago. As bad as it was then, it is even worse now.

So today I call on all Senators, both parties, and the international community to support the efforts to bring this terrible chapter in Syrian history to a close. Peace talks could be a way to end the conflict. However, I am disappointed that the talks this past month did not lead to any tangible progress. The Assad regime has refused to negotiate in good faith.

Diplomacy is part of the solution, but what we need now is to change the momentum on the ground. Peace talks and diplomacy are fine, but unless something changes on the ground, unless we can take some action or take a series of steps to affect what is happening on the ground, all the talks in the world will be to no avail.

The Assad regime and their supporters calculate that they can defeat the opposition and remain in power. The United States should be working with our international partners to tip the balance in favor of the opposition. If we do, not another round of talks will yield the same result: No change.

The international community took a good step in ushering in the passage of U.N. Security Resolution 2139 on February 22. With U.S. leadership, Russia and China—which have obstructed other such resolutions—finally joined the international community in demanding an end to attacks on civilians and that the Syrian regime facilitate humanitarian aid to the besieged areas.

U.N. Security Council Resolution 2129 also condemned detention of journalists. We do not talk enough about this issue. Both international and Syrian journalists have bravely gone into areas of Syria that many other non-combatants would not dare, and many have paid the ultimate price. So far 60 journalists have reportedly been killed inside Syria. These courageous individuals have given us a window into the devastation inside of Syria.

I know myself from reading news reports or columns by journalists in this country how much information we can glean from what is happening inside the country where very few people can go to get information. So we need to focus on that aspect of the problem in the crisis as well.

But we shouldn't allow this crisis to continue worsening before our eyes. We need to act. I have been working on a bipartisan basis to put legislation and legislative support behind efforts to bring this conflict to an end.

In 2012 I worked with Senator RUBIO to introduce S. Res. 370, which called for democratic change in Syria, and S. 3498, the Syrian Humanitarian Support and Democratic Transition Assistance Act of 2012. In 2013 I traveled to Turkey where I met with opposition political and military leaders to discuss the situation inside of Syria. They asked for aid to help build the capacity of the political opposition as well as support to the military opposition in the form of communications gear, night vision goggles, and bulletproof vests.

A year ago Senator RUBIO and I proudly introduced S. 617, Syria Democratic Transition Act of 2013. This bill would, among other things, first increase U.S. assistance to victims of the conflict, both inside of Syria and outside of the country; No. 2, support a political transition by authorizing bilateral assistance to build the capacity of the moderate political opposition to prepare for a transition; No. 3, provide nonlethal equipment to vetted elements of the armed opposition; and fourth, expand sanctions against the Central Bank of Syria and designated individuals, especially any foreign entities that continue to do business with the Assad regime.

After picking up 10 bipartisan cosponsors to our bill, we worked to ensure that the important aspects of S. 617 was incorporated into another bill, S. 960, the Syria Transition Support Act, which then passed the Foreign Relations Committee in a substantial bipartisan manner last year, last summer.

I sent a letter to Secretary Kerry earlier this year urging him to resume nonlethal aid in order to help bolster the opposition before the talks in Switzerland. I was pleased to see that aid resumed not long after I sent the letter. We know Senators KAINE and RUBIO are working on many of the principles that I and others have been pushing for the past 3 years, reiterating the need for unfettered international aid for those in need in Syria and the surrounding region, emphasizing the neutrality of medical professionals and aid providers working inside Syria. Their legislation would support civilians who have suffered during this conflict, particularly women and children. I commend Senators KAINE and RUBIO for their leadership on this resolution. I intend to support this resolution when it is introduced and I urge all my colleagues to do the same.

I believe we can agree on a bipartisan basis that this kind of horrific human suffering is both unconscionable and unacceptable, and we have a national security interest in ending this conflict and countering the influence of Iran and Hezbollah in the region. It is one of the reasons it is in our direct national security interests to make sure we play a substantial role in ending the conflict. Every day the conflict goes on the regime in Iran strengthens to export terrorism and all the trouble the regime imposes upon the region, and secondly, Hezbollah and other extremist elements are empowered the longer the conflict goes.

We need to send a clear message from the Senate that we support efforts to bring Assad's tyrannical rule to an end and to respond to this devastating humanitarian crisis which threatens to destabilize the region and scar a generation of young Syrians.

When we talk about this, we are talking now about millions of children—by one estimate 5.5 million children—being adversely impacted. Thousands—by one estimate more than 10,000—of those children have already been killed. And the ones who have not been killed have seen the kinds of horrors no human being should ever see, even as adults. It would be very difficult to recover from some of the horror and some of the trauma these children have seen. It will be with them for the rest of their lives. We have an obligation to do everything we can to provide pathways to help them, but also to change the dynamic on the battlefield so those children will never have to see this kind of horror again.

Before I wrap up this segment of my remarks, I do want to note that despite the challenge here, the dynamic on the ground that hasn't gone very well, the opposition and the extremist elements within the opposition make it very difficult for us to be helpful even when our government is trying.

The humanitarian crisis that I just outlined is substantial, and the refugee issue in the region is substantial. Just imagine this: In Lebanon alone there are almost 1 million refugees in a country that cannot handle that kind of number. In Jordan, the number is just below 600,000. Most people think the number is a lot higher than that in Jordan. Lebanon, as I said, is almost 1 million; Turkey is 600,000—that number may be low, as well; more than 224,000, by estimates, in Iraq; 134,000 in Egypt. These are the numbers of refugees in just those five countries. Millions of people are being impacted, millions more within the country. If you subtract the refugees who have left the country and subtract the numbers I talked about with regard to children, just the adults within Syria who have been affected are in the millions.

Despite all that horror I think it is important for us to point out that our government has helped enormously. The Obama administration deserves a lot of credit, commendation for what

they have done already. They get criticized a lot, but we should highlight some of the good things they have done. The humanitarian assistance provided by the administration, paid for by U.S. taxpayers, is substantial and should be noted. It is now more than \$1.7 billion. No country comes even close when it comes to the support our taxpayers and our government have provided. About half of that \$1.7 billion has been to help within the country. By one USAID estimate, about \$878 million is for help within Syria. The balance of that, something on the order of a little more than \$850 million, of course, is helping refugees in neighboring countries. So substantial help by the American people should be noted. I think we need to figure out ways to do more. There is probably not a lot of room for more dollars and humanitarian aid, but we should consider that if we can. But there are lots of ways we can help here without directly engaging any of our troops or any of our military might on the ground.

There are lots of ways to help and we urge the administration to keep focus on a new and more substantial strategy, which I know they have been working on. They should consult with Congress and work with us as we move forward.

TRIBUTE TO DAVID KESSLER

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, earlier this year, after 39 years of public service, most recently as the National Zoo's keeper for the Small Mammal House, David Kessler turned in his keys and turned toward retirement. He has dedicated two-thirds of his life to caring for the howler monkeys, lemurs, and shrews living at the zoo.

In addition to feeding the animals and cleaning out their enclosures, Kessler spent his days watching, closely observing any changes in appetite or behavior that might suggest something was amiss. He remembers the endless hours he spent with William, a gibbon, after William's traumatizing experience at the hospital that left him afraid of humans and ostracized from his parents. Kessler holds on to a photo of William sleeping on his shoulder.

At the zoo, it wasn't just about Kessler caring for the animals; it was about connecting with them. They kept him as much as he kept them. He admits he wouldn't be the same person if it weren't for the animals. Their connection has kept him in the moment and happy.

I was touched to read a moving profile of David's career and of his last day in the Small Mammal House. His love for the small mammals for which he cared is evident. Health may have rushed his retirement, but by any measure his was a career spent in service to some of the most interesting creatures visited at our Nation's zoo. I ask unanimous consent to have printed in the RECORD this touching profile from the Washington Post of a career well worth celebrating.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the Washington Post, March 6, 2014]
NATIONAL ZOO'S LONGEST-SERVING KEEPER
BIDS FAREWELL

(By Rachel Manteuffel)

On his last night as the longest-serving keeper at the National Zoo, David S. Kessler checks and rechecks the locks on the enclosures in the Small Mammal House. He collects his farewell gifts and mementos and softly narrates to himself what needs to be done. "Okay, lights out here, good. Hi, babies!" he says to Reuben and Jolla, the howler monkey couple. "Aagh, g'night, sweetheart. Did I wake you up? I'm sorry." He checks the seven timers on the lights, saying "timer" aloud at each. He's not thinking, he says, about how this January night is the last time after 39 years, two-thirds of his life, at the zoo. Now Gus the rock hyrax—who looks like a four-pound guinea pig but is more closely related to the elephant—catches his attention in the dark. It's as if the little guy knows something is up.

Considering the personal magnitude of the occasion, everything is going fine as Kessler prepares to walk away from the animals who he says rescued him, who might just have saved his sanity.

"Gus is sticking his head out—" Kessler notes, then stops. He sobs once, his knees buckle, and he drops face-down on the floor of his House.

Earlier in the day, Kessler talked about his career. "I like to work with animals that nobody thinks about," he said. Small mammals, it's true, are not headlines. Hey, kids, let's go see the shrews! In the past few years, Kessler has been lavishing his attention on the naked mole rat, an animal that resembles a flaccid penis with buck teeth. He always has a favorite weirdo. He has been the red panda guy, the house shrew guy, the Prevost's squirrel guy and the moonrat guy. Moonrats have no natural predators, Kessler says with admiration and a little pride, because they smell so bad.

There aren't a lot of jobs like zookeeper. Technically, Kessler's job has been biologist, but the caretaking—the keeping—is what he loves best.

"It's the care of living things. To keep, that's a beautiful thing. The longer you watch an animal or a person just doing their thing, the more you feel connected to them."

A keeper feeds the animals and mucks out their enclosures, but the real work is observation, watching their bodies and behavior closely for subtle changes that mean something is wrong. And figuring out how to fix it.

Take the lemurs, smallish primates with doglike faces, some of the most social creatures in the Small Mammal House. Cortes and Coronado are recent acquisitions—Kessler drove them down from the Bronx Zoo in his Honda Civic—who are being carefully phased in with Molly, who has been the sole lemur at the Small Mammal House since her mate died. The keepers noticed the new lemurs were keeping low to the ground, unlemurlike behavior. Lemurs are at home in treetops, and the damp ground was irritating one of Cortes's paws. Perhaps Molly was being territorial. They would wait and see, maybe give Molly more attention. And keep watching.

Kessler and his colleagues would eventually determine Molly wasn't behaving aggressively toward the other two lemurs. A volunteer noticed it was the rock hyraxes antagonizing Cortes and Coronado. The rock hyraxes were moved to a different exhibit and, voila, the lemurs returned to the trees.

Lemurs are comparatively easy to read. You can spend less than half an hour watching Molly and feel as if you almost understand her thought process. You can become so absorbed you forget who and what you are, and that you are watching. It can become like reading a novel, the closest humans can get to having someone else's consciousness for a change.

It took a year and a half in the reptile house, but eventually Kessler could tell when something was wrong with a snake.

He's about average height, and he has had a beard most of his 59 years, but not now. He wears khakis and polos to work, with big rubber boots, disposable gloves and face masks. Primates can pass each other disease easily, he says. A keeper's herpes cold sore can kill a gorilla.

In conversation, Kessler tosses out bits of philosophy, science, novels, plays—knowledge you should have, if you had time to read, and he acts as if you probably know them, too.

He knows each of the hundred-odd residents of the Small Mammal House by their six-digit reference number. He has also published or co-written about a dozen research papers. Written three unpublished novels. He once went on a radio show to compose sonnets on demand. He mentors high school students and oversees their research projects. Every year Kessler takes off work to see as many shows in the Capital Fringe Festival as possible, since they often run past midnight and his work would start at 6:30 a.m. He spends an hour a day on the treadmill. He lives in Silver Spring and has been married for 30 years—he still writes his wife, Patricia, sonnets. He smiles when he happens upon a picture of her unexpectedly. They have a grown son, Ben, who co-owns an urban farming company in Charlottesville.

When friends asked, he officiated their 2006 wedding, working with them to write a personalized service, complete with sermon. Kessler took lessons from an actor friend on how not to cry. He always cried at weddings but didn't want to distract while performing one. He was asked to officiate another wedding in Rockville, even though he was racing to New Jersey and back to be with his dying father. His father died. Kessler made the arrangements so his mother and sisters wouldn't have to, then drove from New Jersey to the rehearsal dinner that night. When another friend needed him to, he was the one to officially identify her husband's body.

For a while he fronted a calypso-reggae band. He is universally beloved among colleagues and friends—suspiciously so, if you are a person suspicious of that sort of thing.

Kessler's last "Meet a Mammal" demonstration for zoogoers, on his last day at work, was attended by Linda Hopkins, a zoo electrician who'd known him 11 years and brought him a bottle of wine, and Susie Kane, who had never met him, but she had heard he was leaving, and in 2005 he had kindly answered her e-mailed question about building a naked mole rat habitat for her dorm room.

In December, Scientific American declared the naked mole rat Vertebrate of the Year. He is a happy man who's leaving the job he loves.

He's retiring young because of his psoriatic arthritis. It's much better these days—he gets injections of monoclonal antibodies. But it is progressive. "I only have so much health left," he says, and zookeeping is physically taxing. He wants to travel with his wife, and write.

A loved one once told him that he would probably be happier as a hermit. He wasn't insulted.

"I'm more comfortable by myself and with animals than I am with people," he says. "I